

**MINUTES OF THE BLACK BELT COMMISSION
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING
February 23, 2011**

Wallace State Community College
3000 Earl Goodwin Parkway -Selma, AL

The Black Belt Commission Executive Committee met February 23, 2011 at Wallace State Community College, Selma, Alabama with the following in attendance:

Ron Sparks, Director, Alabama Rural Development Office
Senator Hank Sanders, Co-Chair
Margaret Bentley, Co-Chair
Mayor Sheldon Day, Co-Chair
Senator Billy Beasley, Co-Chair
Congresswoman Terri Sewell
Dr. Daniel Boyd, Chair, Education Committee
Dr. Lynn Boyd, Chair, Families Committee
Dr. David Hale, Chair, Communications Committee
Bea Forniss, Chair, Infrastructure Committee
Donald Mills, Chair, Small Business Committee
Dr. Carol Zippert, Chair, Cultural and Youth Committee
John Zippert, Chair, Agriculture Committee
George Alford, Chair, Manufacturing Commission
Dr. James Mitchell, Skills Training and Workforce Development
Shirley Worthington, Chair, Transportation Committee
Tyson Howard, Executive Director, South Central Alabama Development Commission
John Clyde Riggs, Director, Alabama-Tombigbee Regional Development Commission
Ginger Rue, Project Manager
Candy Capel, Project Manager
Thomas Moore, Project Manager
Emily Law, BBC Executive Director
Ross Gunnells, ARDO Office
Oscar Berry, Congresswoman Terri Sewell's Birmingham Office
Terri Sharpley, District Director, Congresswoman Terri Sewell's Office – Birmingham
William Scott, Outreach Coordinator, Congresswoman Terri Sewell's office - Selma

Margaret Bentley, Senator Sanders, and Sheldon Day opened the meeting and welcomed everyone. Each Co-Chair spoke and everyone present identified themselves by stating their name and what they do. Senator Sanders read a few sentences from the last meeting minutes that referenced the future of the Black Belt Commission. He referred to the fact he had stated that could have been the last meeting of the Commission depending on what the new Governor wants to do. **Senator Billy Beasley** was introduced as a new Co-Chair of the Commission.

Senator Sanders referred to the decision made early on regarding no funds being set aside for the Commission and yet the committees have always found ways to carry out projects and accomplish much.

Ron Sparks, Director, Alabama Rural Development Office, addressed the group and reminded them they were here today because they love the Black Belt. He thanked Dr. Mitchell for hosting the meeting today. He told them Governor Bentley is committed to focusing on the betterment of the quality of life in the Black Belt and assured members that the work in the Black Belt under Governor Bentley is a priority and will not only continue, but expand. He also stated that one of the major focuses of the BBC will be healthcare and reported that Congresswoman Terri Sewell would Chair the Health Committee, with a Co-chair TBA. He also talked about Broadband and the need in the Black Belt for connectivity.

Congresswoman Terri Sewell made a statement about the work in the Black Belt being a partnership and that rural development is a passion of hers. Reported she had hit the ground running in Washington and has been named to the Agriculture Committee and the Committee for Science and Technology. She stated, “The future of the Black Belt is the vision we have in this room. Our children are depending on us and remember why we are doing this.” She accepted the chair of the Health Committee of the BBC.

Ron recognized **Ross Gunnels** of the **Alabama Rural Development Office** who introduced himself.

Ron reported he had spoken with **Dr. John Wheat** with the University of Alabama. He also wanted to know if there was something from a legislative standpoint that might help the Black Belt.

COMMITTEE REPORTS:

AGRICULTURE COMMITTEE – John Zippert, Chair, reported -

- The Agriculture Committee had a meeting February 15, in Selma, AL.
- Most of committee’s work and focus is on the development of the Black Belt Fruit and Vegetable Marketing and Innovation Center that will be located in Selma, AL.
- The committee plans a visit with equipment manufacturers to assess and select equipment for the facility.
- The committee has conducted a geotechnical study of the site and it is deemed suitable for the facility.
- Legal framework for the ownership and operation of the marketing center is under development by AALGA in consultation with the Agriculture Committee.
- A farmers’ cooperative of the producers will be organized to operate the marketing efforts with the support of the colleges and community based organizations such as the Federation of Southern Cooperatives. The ultimate goal is to have the ownership of the facility turned over to the farmers’ cooperative.

- The next meeting of the committee will focus on a timetable for construction of the facility and organizing the cooperative of farmers focused on a 2012 starting date.
- The committee is also working on other projects: beef calf conditioning and marketing program, biomass energy production from agricultural and wood products, medicinal plants, goat production and other agricultural projects.
- Pointed out that Alabama has three land grant universities.

COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE – Dr. David Hale, Chair, reported –

- The committee is still working on Project (LEARN) (Launching Entrepreneurship Across Rural Networks). There are about 150 participants in the Black Belt counties and 300 in all rural Alabama in the last 12 months.
- The committee is working with Black Belt Treasures online as an e-commerce initiative and will provide arts education to area residents and will include more extensive coverage of artists and their work.
- **John Clyde Riggs, Director of Alabama-Tombigbee-** talked about the University of Alabama assisting with designing a computer system network for Black Belt Treasures. The current website does not promote items well. Stated there had to be thousands of hits to get one sale. It's been an exciting Black Belt initiative.
- **New initiatives are:**
- Working with Forza Financial, Alabama Microfinance Initiative on initial starter loans for micro-businesses. Committee work includes an awareness campaign and attempts to provide a match-maker site for micro-enterprises to find purchasers for their products and services with the initial focus on services needed by U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development within Alabama.
- Project to provide critical location information to corporate decision makers concerning site selection.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE - Felecia Jones, Chair, Thomas Moore, Project Manager, reported-

- The **Assets for Independence Program** continues. Deferred to Shirley Worthington who gave an update on the Assets for Independence program.
- Value of assets purchased to date is \$278,939.63.
- Black Belt Region - \$115,000 in matching funds.
- 32 investors enrolled, with 31 accounts open, 10 accounts closed and 7 assets purchased.
- Black Belt counties: Sumter – Home, education and small business - \$105,450 total value; Greene – Home and small business - \$33,382.00 total value;
- Total Black Belt investment is \$138,832.
- Total accounts available to be filled are 50 with 21 accounts filled and 29 to be filled.
- Submitted a \$2 million HUD Rural Innovations Fund grant. Pam Dorr (HERO) is applying for and which will be utilized to support a project that will introduce commercial bamboo as a viable crop for smaller farmers in the Black Belt.

Tuskegee Macon CDC and the United Way of Central Alabama are active partners and leveraged in-kind match provided by many partners in the amount of \$1,317,864. The primary activity will be in Hale, Wilcox and Perry counties.

- The Rural Fund grant investment of \$2,000,000 will result in the following community assets built in the Alabama Black Belt: Innovative housing - \$38,801,355 and Innovative Economic development - \$1,138,320, 6 sherrettes sponsored by Marsha Folsom, expansion of two small businesses in Hale County, Pie Lab and Pecan, planting 3 acres of commercial bamboo provided by Boo Shoot Gardens, developing microenterprise and small business, and working on partnerships to ensure that a portion of the harvesting, processing and products resulting from bamboo are based in the Black Belt.

CULTURAL AND YOUTH – Carol Zippert, Chair, reported -

- The Cultural and Youth Committee continues its collaborative with the Alabama State Council on the Arts (ASCA) and the Black Belt Community Foundation (BBCF).
- This collaborative has received a state grant of \$245,700 through the ASCA for the fiscal year 2010-2011 to support community arts projects and related activities in the 12 county Black Belt region.
- The grant is administered through the Black Belt Community Foundation.
- The resources support a community arts coordinator based at the BBCF, community arts projects with a focus on youth, sponsors community arts workshops and continues to work on a database of artists and arts related organizations and activities based in the Black Belt region.

EDUCATION COMMITTEE – Dr. Daniel Boyd, Chair, reported-

- This committee just completed the Dropout Prevention Summit in Montgomery on February 18, 2011. (See attached article.) It was a huge success with 250 in attendance.
- Dr. Gene Bottoms, the closing speaker, started the ‘High schools that work movement.’
- Also currently working on launching a project to collect gently-used ACT and SAT prep materials from college students for distribution to Black Belt high school sophomores and juniors. A committee member who is a University of Alabama Fellow will spearhead this effort.
- Will work with Nisa Miranda with ACE program to distribute these.
- Continuing to seek funding to provide Black Belt scholarships to the University of Alabama Student Introduction to Engineering summer program for rising juniors and seniors. Also currently working on a public relations piece for distribution to state media about how the program has positively impacted past Black Belt scholarship recipients to this program.
- Thanked Thomas for his assistance as a Project Manager and offered to work with other committees.

FAMILIES COMMITTEE – Dr. Lynn Boyd, Chair, reported -

- Currently working on a brochure for Black Belt high school students regarding how to get a summer job. The downturn in the economy has made it more difficult for students to procure summer employment since they are now competing with more adults than before for openings.
- The brochure will be distributed to Black Belt high schools and will give students advice on how to present themselves professionally and where to seek employment. Will work with Nisa Miranda to distribute.
- Also working on the Full Service Community Schools grant with Lowndes County Public Schools. Goal is to have elementary and/or secondary schools work with community-based organizations and other public or private entities to provide a coordinated and integrated set of academic, social, and health services that respond to the needs of students, their families and the community.
- Still working on Angel Food Project in Lowndes County.
- New project involves grant writing and expanding school services to provide mental health assistance. Make contact with student and family and offer support from elementary to high school to college.

Congresswoman Terri Sewell had to leave but brought attention to the calendars from the United State House of Representatives and her latest newsletter for everyone to pick up before they leave. She also gave out information sheets on a Congressional Art Competition for Alabama High School Students in the 7th District. The winning piece will be displayed in the United States Capitol for one year, along with winners from other Congressional districts.

HEALTH COMMITTEE —

- Emily Law reported the last health update prepared by Laurie Stewart was attached.
- As reported in opening statements, Ron Sparks stated that Congresswoman Terri Sewell had been asked to chair the Health Committee which she has accepted.
- Discussed the KidCheck Program being moved to SightSavers by Memorandum of Understanding.

INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE – Bea Forniss, Chair, reported-

- Infrastructure means, water, sewer and paving roads.
- This year's focus is changing in that Governor Bentley's priority is job creation.
- We'll be working with ARC, DRA and Entrepreneurial programs and women-owned businesses to increase awareness and search for funding.
- Money will be tight for a while to come and we'll be writing grants at ADECA to add to those coming in.
- She would be attending the National Governor's Association this weekend in Washington with Delta Regional Authority.
- Funded one recaptured funds project in Demopolis for drainage for 250 homes. \$500,000 was awarded.
- Some projects are critical, but it has to be a legitimate project to be funded.

- We are going to work with Ron and look forward to being successful.

MANUFACTURING COMMITTEE – George Alford, Chair, reported-

- He was glad to be back feeling well. Thanked everyone for their prayers and concern over the past year.
- Reported the past year had not been a great year for manufacturing anywhere, especially in the Black Belt.
- He is preparing a questionnaire to reset priorities for his committee.

MARKETING & TOURISM – Lauri Cothran, Chair –Thomas Moore, Project Manager, reported-

- The Committee continues to work on the Black Belt Nature and Heritage Trail to gain federal designation.
- No meetings have been held.

SKILLS TRAINING AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT – Dr. James Mitchell, Chair, reported-

Projects in progress or completed to include:

- Thirty-eight Alabamians completed and were certified in multicraft maintenance. (M3)
- Sixty-four people completed all qualifications for Alabama Workers Certification through the Ready-to-Work Program.
- Fifty students passed the AIDT final test certification.
- Over 1,750 Alabamian's were trained in two job readiness and entrepreneurial development programs conducted in Perry, Wilcox, and Dallas counties.
- Thirty-six students from Lowndes, Perry and Dallas counties have taken technical training program dual enrollment classes.
- Fifty students from Dallas County schools completing a job readiness program.
- Implemented a high school Licensed Practical Nursing program with Perry County Schools.

Future projects include:

- Incorporate business and industry's use of the \$2.7 million interactive 3-D laboratory at Wallace Community College in Selma.
- Identify business and industry internship slots for K-12 technical students throughout the Black Belt.
- Secure additional funding for Ready-to-Work initiatives in the Black Belt.
- Provide job readiness training for 220 Alabamians in the Black Belt.
- Secure funding for mobile welding units.

SMALL BUSINESS COMMITTEE – Donald Mills, Chair, reported-

- Met February 15 at the University of West Alabama.
- Next meeting is a conference call scheduled for March 10.

Projects planned for 2011 include:

- Procurement Conference for West Alabama in Thomasville on April 14,
- SBA Lender Conference in Birmingham on April 20,

- Youth Entrepreneurial Success workshop on May 18,
- National Small Business Week seminar in Livingston on May 25,
- CORE FOUR Small Business class in Thomasville or Jackson on June 28-30,
- Youth Entrepreneurial Awareness and Business Plan Competition in August,
- Third Annual Small Business Resource Fair in Selma in September,
- CORE FOUR course in Demopolis in October,
- Small business networking holiday mixer in December.

TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE – Shirley Worthington, Chair, reported-

- Alabama’s Transit Study proposal is being submitted as a project of the Alabama Transit Coalition in partnership with AARP the Public Affairs Research council of Alabama. ADECA has responded positively to the funding request.
- The goal of this study is to identify strategies that can enable the state to better develop comprehensive, integrated planning that includes public and private transit options to link inter-municipality, inter-county, and intra-county resources.
- The Alabama Transit Coalition believes Transportation can be the new economic engine for the Black Belt.
- The Alabama Transit Coalition’s objectives include: (Please see attached sheet.)
 1. Economic development,
 2. Job growth,
 3. Increased use of multi-modal transportation,
 4. Improved access to preventative care,
 5. Building 21st Century infrastructure.

REGIONAL COUNCIL REPORTS:

John Clyde Riggs, Alabama-Tombigbee Regional Commission –

- Focus is on broadband.
- Trillion Communications funded \$60 million with \$30 million in matching contributions to provide broadband service in Macon, Dallas, Wilcox counties.
- Contracted with Kathy Johnson to work with counties in this area to make sure the project is being done the way the grant requires. There are potential danger areas. She will be present at every meeting to monitor.
- This has the potential to be a great project, but it’s also a dangerous one.

Tyson Howard, South Central Alabama Development Commission –

- Reported they are continuing with their projects.
- Troy Cablevision- Receiving \$26.1 million which will allow them to offer affordable middle-mile broadband service in southeast Alabama.
- “Objective 38” refers to Exit 38 which continues to be a dormant exit. Working on method to entice people off I-85 to visit Tuskegee, Tuskegee Airmen Museum, and Tuskegee University.

- **Bob Lake, West Alabama Regional Planning (Absent)**

Senator Sanders expressed appreciation to Dr. Mitchell for hosting the meeting and offered thanks for the meal.

Meeting adjourned at 12 Noon for a delicious lunch sponsored by Dr. Mitchell and Senator Hank Sanders.